

# Philosophic Exchange

---

Volume 15

Number 1 *Volume 15-16 (1984-1985)*

Article 2

---

1-1-1984

## Facing Death: Four Literary Accounts

Konstantin Kolenda

*Rice University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Kolenda, Konstantin (1984) "Facing Death: Four Literary Accounts," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex/vol15/iss1/2](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol15/iss1/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).



The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



*Konstantin Kolenda  
Rice University*

## Facing Death: Four Literary Accounts

Konstantin Kolenda

A free man thinks of death least of all  
things; and his wisdom is a meditation  
not of death but of life.

Spinoza's *Ethics*

Death is a way to be, which Dasein  
takes over as soon as it is.

Heidegger's *Being and Time*

### **Faust**

When his close friend Friedrich Schiller died in 1905, Goethe refused to attend the funeral. All his life he had an almost moribid dislike of such ceremonies and avoided anything that had to do with death and dying. In his essay on Nature Goethe claimed that the fear of death was really love of life and speculated that death was just a trick of life to have more life. On his own death bed his last words were "More light." One might wonder what lofty thoughts he meant to communicate, even though one witness suggested that he simply wanted the window shades to be raised.

If we turn to Goethe's drama *Faust*, on which he worked almost his entire lifetime, we find reasons for suspecting that the protagonist is engaged in a deliberate denial of death. When at the end of his incredible exploits with the devil's help Faust senses that his end may be near, his inner doubts come to him in the shape of Care which appears in the company of her three sisters: Dearth, Debt, and Trouble, and all three announce the imminent arrival of their brother, Death. Faust does not quite follow what the specters are saying, although he *seems* to make out the word "death." It is significant that the foreboding of his final hour comes to him indirectly, via the personifications of other life-denying phenomena.

It is also important that in order to be in Faust's presence, Care has to enter through a keyhole. As an insidious, paralyzing force, Care was inimical to Faust's fundamental attitude of life. For a variety of reasons he was immune to it. One of them was of course his titanism, his immense hunger for experience. A person with such an attitude is likely to be insulated from will-destroying phenomena. His stubborn vitality was a formidable obstacle to ennui, vacillation, despair, and doublemindedness. True, Faust was afflicted by this debilitating malady at the beginning of the drama and was even on the verge of

committing suicide. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that what broke this ennui was his pact with the devil. If we examine that pact carefully, we will find that it is not really a utilitarian bargain but an act of defiance. Faust *dares* the devil to subdue his immense craving for experience, adventure, for endless exploration. When he signs with his blood on the dotted line, he is sure that the devil will lose.

We must not overlook that by the time he goes through the charade with the devil, Faust's inner strength has been already restored. His attempt at suicide has been interrupted by the ringing of Easter bells. The bells are a symbol of resurrection, in a wider sense than the theological. As Goethe points out in the drama, Faust understands the bells to be calling people back to the reality of all the good things that make life worthwhile -- spring, celebration, job, wonder, exuberance, fellow feeling. Faust experiences all these emotions when he joins the throng of simple people, for whom the Resurrection of the Lord in fact connotes all these human values.

It would be wrong, therefore, to assume that Faust signs the pact with the devil in a moment of weakness, of spiritual exhaustion. By that time he has already worked his way, by himself, or perhaps by responding to the everpresent and everactive force of nature symbolized by Easter bells, out of his temporary exhaustion and ennui. When he confronts the devil, he confronts him as a kind of man the Lord described him in the Prologue, namely, a good man, who in spite of the obscurity of his impulses knows the right and the true way. And the Lord is not likely to be mistaken.

It is important to note this early characterization of Faust, because it remains true to the end. He is the servant of life, and is so to the hilt. He has made up his mind that the path "to the beyond" is of no interest and of no consequence to a being whose task is to serve this life, this earth. Faithful to his commitment, the only thing Faust is afraid of is that his dedication to living to the fullest might be undermined. He vehemently rejects Care and her cohorts precisely for that reason. The words he speaks make this attitude abundantly clear:

Accursed specters! Thus you treat the human race a  
thousand times over; even neutral days you transform  
into a loathsome tangle of ensnaring torments.  
Demons, I know, are hard to get rid of, for the stern  
bond of the spirit cannot be broken; yet your power,  
O care, insidiously great as it is, I shall not acknowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The only thing Care can do to Faust is to blind him. The damage she does affects his finite, vulnerable body, but not his spirit. Although blind, Faust still is guided by the brightly burning light of his unconquerable activism. He orders that the work of reclaiming the



swamp and building the canal be continued. What he takes to be the clanging of spades enlarging his canal is in fact the digging of his grave.

It might be tempted to speculate here that Faust is repressing the awareness of the sneaky approach of death, but another and simpler explanation is available to us, an explanation which is supported by all we know about his character. Faust is *oblivious* to death. He is so absorbed in his life project that nothing can distract him from it, even if we, the outsiders, can see that he is mistaken. But nothing in the drama shows that he is self-deceived.

He does, even in the final moments deceive the devil, thus proving that his initial resolve to hold his own against Mephistopheles is being lived up to. Perhaps the manner in which Faust gets the upper hand over the devil in his final pronouncement just before he dies is questionable. It might even be called quibbling. The words which Faust speaks do contain the formula which, when pronounced, should give Mephistopheles the right to his soul: "Do stay with me, you are so good." But notice that his formula is offered in the subjunctive. He *would* be satisfied, if that which he desires were to happen. Faust even says that he *anticipates* that moment. Should that moment come, Faust would "stand on free ground with a free people." But that possibility is not yet actual, at least Mephistopheles has not produced it.

One might, with some justification, say that Faust, and Goethe with him, pulls a fast trick. But the intent of the trick is clear and is consistent with what Goethe told us about Faust's attitude to life. The value of that attitude is indicative of the nature of ultimate reality, symbolized in the drama by God and by the elaborate salvation scene with which the drama ends. Faust is worthy of salvation because he lives up to what is expected of him as a good man, as God's servant. He was so completely devoted to his task on earth that he refused to be distracted from it by any thoughts of otherworldly rewards and punishments. Altogether oblivious to death, he has no interest in it and devotes no thought to it. He refuses to make it an object of his concern.

### Kurtz

Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is a Faustian character. Like Faust, he enters into a pact with the devil. The circumstances under which he does so are hidden from the reader, but the contrast between what Kurtz was before he came to the Congo and what he became after "the jungle patted him on the head" justifies the conclusion that there was a drastic change inside Kurtz's soul. As Marlow puts it, his soul went mad. Like Faust, Kurtz was an extraordinary individual. People who knew him were impressed by his intelligence,

ambition, literary and artistic talents. His fine organizational abilities earned him a responsible position in the task of collecting ivory from the natives after he joined the Congo expedition. Like Goethe's Faust, he has a great deal of personal charm and inspired deep love of a sensitive and pure woman. The ability to impress people with his broad knowledge and expansive eloquence stood him in good stead also after the "conversion" has occurred. Not only the natives for whom he became a god, but also the colorful and philosophical Russian sailor, who attached himself to Kurtz in his outpost, were fascinated by his personality.

Admittedly, in contrast to Goethe, who depicts Faust's alliance with the devil as a personal decision, Conrad suggests that the fateful change in Kurtz's heart reflects the hollowness and insecurity of Western man in general. On its surface, Western civilization seems motivated by high, noble ideals. But when you look at it more closely, the veneer of highmindedness disappears and reveals crass and exploitative motives. The entire project of colonization was but a pretext to engage in robbery on a grand scale, disguised as an august and benevolent enterprise. Kurtz's high ambition to become a famous journalist, or a statesman, or a celebrated artist is suddenly replaced by a naked desire for wealth and domination.

It is not clear from the novel what were the real precipitating causes. One may speculate that one of them was the European ethnocentrism. In spite of the supposed enlightenment and broadmindedness, in spite of centuries of Christian morality that enjoins the love of all humanity the colonizers fell morally apart when they confronted the culturally different inhabitants of the dark continent. It did not occur to them that in Africa they were in the presence of just another edition of common humanity, and they treated the natives cruelly and with criminal indifference, oblivious to the horrendous suffering they caused. Even Marlow, who was given the role of a detached, impartial, but sensitive spectator, sympathized with his fellow-whites and wondered whether the Africans were like the rest of humanity. Occasionally he had a glimpse of belonging to the same race with them, but this insight, instead of delighting him, left him nonplussed and alarmed.

Thus at least a part of the explanation for Kurtz's becoming a ruthless exploiter of the natives was the moral bewilderment he shared with the rest of the invading whites. This bewilderment, coupled with plain greed, allowed him to resort to unspeakable abominations, by means of which, with the help of thundering firearms, he gained power over the natives. If there was an inner struggle in Kurtz at the time he embarked upon his infamous exploits, we have a bare hint of it, when Conrad tells us that the idealistic pamphlet about the white man's civilizing mission, written by Kurtz before he came to the



Congo, was later subscribed by him: "Exterminate the brutes!"

The psychological center of Conrad's novel, however, is Kurtz's struggle with himself on his deathbed when he finally pronounced a verdict on what has happened to him, or more correctly, on what he allowed to happen to himself. His words, "The horror! the horror!" acquired a revelatory significance for Marlow who watched Kurtz's inner struggle. His illness and imminent death forced upon Kurtz the task of coming to terms with himself. Underneath the surface events which Conrad describes in the story, a mighty contest was playing itself between Kurtz and the approaching death. And the referee Marlow, the only person genuinely interested in the outcome of this struggle, proclaimed Kurtz the victor!

The question was whether Kurtz would die *before* arriving at a truthful account and evaluation of what had happened to him when the jungle patted him on the head. The words of self-revulsion proclaimed the verdict. Kurtz died undeceived, fully aware of what he allowed his life to become: horrible. What impressed Marlow was the enormity of the struggle that took place in Kurtz's soul, first in his stockade among the natives whom he ruled, and later on the steamer. Marlow believed himself to be witnessing a titanic contest between two sides of the human spirit: ambition and honesty. Kurtz was making mighty strides toward realizing his ambitions, but at what cost? That question he suppressed or avoided as long as he was intoxicated by his success. But when illness came and his energies departed, he had time to reflect and to look into himself. The imminence of death was an occasion either to come clean or to keep lying to himself -- and lying, Marlow had told us, has a taint of death in it. So by turning against *that* enemy Kurtz was in effect gaining victory over death. He did not allow it to overtake him before it was too late. That's why Marlow admired him and tried to protect his memory as much as he could.

Marlow's admiration for Kurtz's struggle with and eventual victory over death was in part a result of comparing Kurtz's way of handling this ultimate crisis with what Marlow saw happening in other cases, his own included. About himself he says:

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in impalpable grayness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.<sup>2</sup>

34 *Konstantin Kolenda*

In contrast, Marlow regarded Kurtz's final outcry on his deathbed as "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terror, by abominable satisfactions." The grim verdict behind Kurtz's final words elevated him, in Marlow's mind, above the common man and thereby wrested the truth away from the swiftly approaching death. Conrad's story, in contrast to Goethe's drama, assigns to death, as a threat of complete meaninglessness, the dramatic power of releasing from the human spirit a desperate effort to render an honest verdict about oneself. Instead of being oblivious to death, as was Faust, Kurtz used the approach of death as an occasion for confessional self-condemnation. For Marlow, it was a remarkable feat, even though it left life "a greater riddle than some of us think it to be."

*Budd*

Throughout the story Melville tells us nothing about Billy Budd's own thoughts or state of mind at any stage of the depicted events, but the confident third-person narrative encourages in the reader the assurance that he knows "the handsome sailor" quite well. One of the essential things the author communicates about his hero is Billy's innocence, an absolute lack of guile. He is almost unbelievably trustworthy, straightforward, and honest. His guilelessness would look like stupidity, a total lack of worldly wisdom, were it not for the fact that Billy is also a competent, quick learner who performs his tasks cheerfully and efficiently. His easy-going manner and transparent good will are quickly noted and appreciated by the crew and the officers, except for Claggart, who for some inscrutable reasons is disquieted by Billy's angelic nature and plots to do him in. The young sailor's innocence prevents him from seeing Claggart's sinister designs. When he is suddenly and unexpectedly accused in Captain Vere's presence of plotting mutiny, the surprise generates a shock. Unable to express his outrage, because he suffers from a speech impediment in stressful moments, Billy uncontrolledly hits out at Claggart, causing his death. His innocence left Billy unprepared for such a horrendous treachery, and his reaction was almost an automatic bodily reflex, bypassing his mind. Unfortunately for him, due to the special circumstances this spontaneous action cost him his life -- he was condemned to be hanged.

Whether this condemnation was justified is a complex matter, deserving a detailed treatment. What interests us now is how Billy faced his death. Although Melville limits himself to a small number of clues, he makes it clear that Billy faced death the same way he led his life — as just another occasion to be himself. In that regard there is a parallel between Faust and Budd; both remain true to their basic



character. Both are oblivious to death, in the sense that it does not change their fundamental outlook. Certainly, some important contrasts are there. Faust is old, experienced, and self-conscious. Billy is young, innocent, and totally unselfconscious. But Billy, like Faust, does not hesitate to use his final moments in the way he used his all other moments of life: to advance whatever causes seem worthy of support at the moment.

In one poignant scene Melville speculates what Captain Vere probably said to Billy in their private meeting.

It would have been in consonance with the spirit of Captain Vere should he on this occasion have concealed nothing from the condemned one -- should he indeed have frankly disclosed to him that part himself had played in bringing about the decision, at the same time revealing his actuating motives. On Billy's side it is not improbable that such a confession would have been received in much the same spirit that prompted it. Not without a sort of joy indeed he might have appreciated the brave opinion of him implied in his Captain making such a confidant of him. Nor, as to the sentence itself could he have been insensible that it was imparted to him as to one not afraid to die. Even more may have been. Captain Vere in the end may have developed the passion sometimes latent under an interior stoical and indifferent. He was old enough to have been Billy's father. The austere devotee of military duty letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity may in the end have caught Billy to his heart even as Abraham may have caught young Isaak on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to exacting behest.<sup>3</sup>

By refraining from telling us anything about the way Billy felt about his self-sacrifice, Melville forces the reader to be guided only by the characterization of Billy offered before the tragic development. But Billy's behavior clearly indicates that what he was doing at the final moments was no different from what he was doing all along -- unself-consciously and selflessly he advanced whatever worthwhile cause life placed before him.

Melville's account of the conversation with Vere leaves no other inference possible than that Billy deliberately chose to support his captain in the crucial task of preventing mutiny from breaking out. The fact that the crew echoed his shout "Long live Captain Vere!" just before being hanged must be included among factors that actually kept the crew under Vere's control. This was the last service the

young foretopman rendered to his captain. Thus, we are not unjustified in concluding that, like Faust, Billy was oblivious to his death, or rather, used it as a means of bringing about something he believed to be important. Perhaps it was easy for him to face death in this way because in all of his young life Billy was doing nothing else.

### **Meursault**

Another famous literary account of an impending execution is that of Meursault in Camus' *Stranger*. In that story also a young man is suddenly facing death. Like Billy Budd, Meursault is barely in the threshold of adulthood. But in contrast to Budd, Meursault is strangely detached from life around him. Indeed, he is a stranger to himself. Events impinge on his psyche lightly; he does not feel their weight. Occurrences that ordinarily strike people as eventful concern him only superficially, if at all. His mother's death and funeral do not touch him. He goes through conventional motions expected on such occasions, but he sees no significance in them. Things that matter to others do not matter to Meursault. He is not a wicked man. In fact, he seems a decent chap. He earns his living. He is a respectable, punctual, though not overly ambitious employee. He enjoys the simple pleasures of life -- going to the beach, watching the comings and goings of city life from his apartment window, catching a ride on a moving truck. He carries on an affair with a wholesome girl and stands in a friendly relation to several acquaintances. When asked for a favor he easily obliges without weighing any advantages for himself.

And yet, even the small, simple pleasures he gets out of life do not engage him strongly. He takes things as they come; they do not arouse his interest in any firm and steady way. Things swim in and out of his consciousness, and he does not dwell on them with any degree of intensity. He enjoys making love to Marie, but he resists her attempts to interpret it as a sign of love for her. When she asks whether he wants to get married he is willing to do so, if it really is a matter of importance to her. To him it is not. But not marrying is not important to him either; as far as he is concerned, he could take it or leave it. To be sure, he often finds things strange or stupid, but he is not really concerned or indignant. When some unwelcome things happen to him, he is annoyed and somewhat put off. But he does not dwell on such events; they do not touch him in a lasting way. Literally, he keeps his cool.

Meursault is very responsive to the scenery around him; his gaze takes in things and events as they happen, and he absorbs them in a detached, spectator-like way. He briefly muses over what he sees, but his musing is short-lived and his observations pass unscrutinized.

When he listens to what is being said about him during the trial, he comments: "I never have been able to regret anything at all in all my life. I've always been far too much absorbed in the present moment, or the immediate future, to think back."

His receptiveness to stimuli operates not only on the intellectual level but also on the emotional and behavioral levels. Natural phenomena strongly impress themselves on his psyche. He is very conscious of the effects of the sun, sky, water. Bodily sensations seem to dominate his awareness. The weather, the time of day, dusk or dawn, affect the way he feels. Even the key events of his life seem to be almost determined by natural phenomena. The fateful shooting of the Arab is seen by him as a result of the sun's rays reflected in the blade of the knife. Camus leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that Meursault never intended to kill the Arab. He is probably truthful and quite correct in telling the court when asked directly why he fired the first shot, "It was because of the sun."

Meursault's arrest and trial gradually force him out of his detachment. It is almost a surprise for him to find that he has a definite personal identity. That identity at first emerges as the target of society's indignation. Although he is being tried for murder, Meursault soon finds out that his crime consists primarily in failing to behave in accordance with conventional rules: he smokes and drinks coffee during the wake for his mother, he goes to see a comic movie with his girlfriend and takes her to bed right after his mother's funeral, and most importantly, he refuses to profess a belief in God. Camus makes it clear that Meursault would not have been condemned to die if he had indicated a willingness to bow in the direction of conventional beliefs of his society. But Meursault refuses to do so, and his personal identity begins to define itself in terms of his opposition to society. In the dramatic scene with the priest after being condemned to death, he suddenly becomes an impassioned protagonist of his detached, estranged, free-floating way of life and defends it in an eloquent outburst.

Meursault's newly found commitment to his casual, carefree style of life is so strong that he is using his impending execution as an ally in his battle against the stuffy, freedom-denying values of his society. In the face of death, he is "ready to start life over again."

It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean,  
emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled  
with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first,  
I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the  
universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly,  
made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy  
still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less



lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.<sup>4</sup>

The philosophical focus of Camus' story lies in Meursault's transition from nonchalant indifference to absolute commitment, from being a paradoxically selfless egoist thoughtlessly pursuing objectives that float into his circumstances to suddenly becoming aware that he can take a position on his life, that he can set *himself* against the world, thus acquiring an identity of his own. The measure of this commitment is the fervor with which he accepts his death. Indeed, he welcomes his death as substantiating, paradoxically and absurdly, his barely discovered but already doomed personal reality.

### ***Spinoza or Heidegger?***

Martin Heidegger's analysis of the meaning of death in *Being and Time* has been received by many philosophers and theologians as a tremendous insight into the human situation.<sup>6</sup> Although the details of Heidegger's discussion are complex and are clothed in startling neologisms, his essential objective is to point up the relevance of death to every moment of living, as revealed in his quote, "As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die."<sup>7</sup> Human existence is characterized as *being-towards-death* (*Sein-sum-Tode*). Inauthentic existence covers up the fact of one's death by resorting to various strategies of deflecting a person's attention from its inescapability and by thinking of it as only an external possibility, merely to be expected as an objective occurrence. Authentic existence takes up its own inevitable demise subjectively into account, and by anticipating it, makes it a part of one's innermost being. The mode of this anticipation is not fear but anxiety, a form of care concerning the meaning of one's own individual existence. "Death does not just 'belong' to one's Dasein in an undifferentiated way, death lays claim to it as an *individual* Dasein."

Heidegger's view is diametrically opposed to that of Spinoza, who did not think that the inclusion of the fact of death among one's concerns is a mark of wisdom. In denying that one's own *death* is a possible object of thought, Spinoza was echoing the Stoics' observation that "where we are, death is not, and where death is, we are not." A more recent version of this view was expressed by Wittgenstein when he noted that death is not an event in life, because we cannot experience its completion. Similarly, Proust spoke of "the mind's inability when it ponders death, to picture something other than life." Woody Allen gave a witty twist to this logical conundrum: "It is not that I am

afraid to die. I just don't want to be around when it happens." Allen's formulation calls attention to the difference between the fact of death and the concern about death. Paul Edwards has criticized at length Heidegger's blurring of this distinction. Of course human beings, unlike plants and animals, can know that they are going to die, and that knowledge can influence them in various ways. But to say this is not to express a deep original thought but a platitude, concludes Edwards.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Heidegger's and Spinoza's respective positions on what we should think of death are mutually incompatible, and the question worth asking is whether the four literary accounts we have examined tend to support one view or the other. It is not a question of finding empirical evidence for either position. Just how and in what way empirical evidence, including fictional reflection on the human condition, supports a philosophical position is difficult to say. Neither Spinoza nor Heidegger is telling us what is *the case*, nor are they offering us a psychological or sociological account. Rather, drawing on whatever experience they regard as relevant, they *recommend* a certain attitude toward the fact of our mortality. After all, Heidegger distinguished between the authentic and the inauthentic ways of being, and Spinoza urged us to cultivate active rather than passive emotions, and in the passage quoted above spoke not of all persons but only of those who are free and wise. We can profitably turn to literary works for a possible corroboration of philosophical recommendations, because artists often succeed in selecting for attention situations of deep and universal human significance.

To my view, the stories we have examined definitely support Spinoza's view. In all cases, the concern about death, contrary to Heidegger's recommendation, does not permeate their characters' lives; their existence is *not* being-towards-death. Faust is the most glaring case. Death does not concern him in the least; he has no interest in it. Everything he does is in the service of expanding the range of his experience. One might say that Faust never even *faces* death. He refuses to be involved in any deliberation in which the consideration of death is a factor. The reason why he vehemently rejects Care is because she brings in her wake specters that paralyze the human will. Man strives as long as he lives, and this means that death, as the stoppage of striving, is the moral enemy of the human spirit. As such, it cannot *belong* to what is essentially human; on the contrary, if included in one's purview, it would undermine what is most characteristic of humanity.

In contrast to Faust, Kurtz does not avoid the stare of death when he realizes that it is imminent. But what does the contemplation of his lurking death prompt Kurtz to do? It forces him to rethink his life, to reexamine the motives and the consequences of his actions. Morally



40 *Konstantin Kolenda*

speaking, his illness and his awareness of impending death were a boon to him. Had he no occasion to brood over his deeds while lying deathly ill, first in his stockade and later on the deck of the steamer, had he suddenly died at the height of his ivory-grabbing exploits, he would not have achieved what Marlow later was to describe as a victory. In that sense, Kurtz's being-towards-death played a positive role in his truthful self-discovery. His struggle with his soul, from which he emerged an honest and cleansed man, was precipitated by his inability to continue unimpeded in his rush toward wealth and power. It is not that he was afraid to die; his anxiety was generated by his not wanting to die as a person who had neglected to pronounce a correct judgment on his life.

Thus his illness and his confrontation with death was *one* of his life's possibilities, and he made use of it in a way that impressed the person who witnessed that confrontation. Marlow felt privileged to watch the inner drama of the dying man. Given his circumstances, Kurtz lived authentically in the face of death, and only within *these* circumstances does the talk of Heideggerian authenticity make sense. Before he faced up to the imminence of his demise, he couldn't have been described as living inauthentically; he was not *denying* death, because he was engrossed in the pursuit of his ambitious project. That pursuit was authentic in its own way; it expressed Kurtz's own deliberately and freely chosen goals. But in facing death Kurtz was provided with an opportunity to revise his estimate of the meaning of these goals, and he revised them in the direction of truth. He used that opportunity well.

How did Billy Budd get on a collision course with death? By sheer accident, through a stroke of fate. Until Claggart suddenly accused him of fomenting mutiny, Billy's general attitude couldn't possibly be described as being-towards-death. His demeanor exuded cheerful innocence, disregard of danger, and the willingness to undertake whatever tasks were put before him. Like Faust, he seemed oblivious to the possibility of death, unaware of its possible relevance. Indeed, the grandeur of his heroism in the face of death is underscored by the easy transition he has made from being unaware of death to having to face it so suddenly. Temperamentally he was completely unprepared for it. Had Melville chosen to represent him as a reflective, philosophical person who thought about the eventuality of death and who was guided by this awareness in his daily actions, Billy would have been less heroic, less of an astounding human phenomenon Melville wanted him to be. Part of the author's purpose was to put his character on a collision course with death, into an awareness of being-towards-death, suddenly and unexpectedly. The astounding thing was the easy way in which Billy made the transition from wholeheartedly being-toward-life to being-towards-death.



But this contrived Heideggerese vocabulary is misleading when applied to Billy. It would be more accurate to say that he converted his predicament, his impending execution, into one more, his last, opportunity to serve life. The enthusiasm he put into his final exclamation "Long live Captain Vere!" testifies to the fact that he treated the necessity of facing death as one of the possibilities of life. In that regard, although inexperienced and unreflective, Billy was like Faust: he converted every situation into an opportunity to contribute to whatever worthwhile cause he ran across. That's why he throws himself behind his captain's difficult task of maintaining the discipline and battle-readiness of the *Indomitable*. It is the seeming obliviousness to his own death, his nonchalant dismissal of it, that makes the young sailor so extraordinary. But Melville portrays him as true to his character to the very end, leaving the leader astounded and humbled. Billy lived and died as Spinoza's free man, even if his wisdom was almost instinctive, a gift of nature.

The person who comes closest to embracing a Heideggerian position is Meursault, the most "existentialist" character of the four. He comes alive as an active protagonist only when his death appears to him inevitable. The thought that he will die ignites in him, for the first time in his life, a spark of responsiveness to what life had to offer. Suddenly he realizes that he was happy and is happy still. One may wonder why it takes a confrontation with *death* to elicit a positive response to at least some things that people usually care about. Meursault's previous apathy, his anemic response to whatever came his way, be it Marie's love or the Arab's death, is replaced by an affirmation of the natural sources of human happiness or suffering. He is shaken out of his indifference when he takes his own impending death into account. One might say of Meursault that he became normally human only as he turned into a being-towards-death, when he perceived that death belonged to his *Dasein*. Up to that moment, we may say with Heidegger, he existed inauthentically.

But this is precisely the least convincing aspect of Camus' story. There is nothing in Meursault prior to his "existentialist" insight that prepares us for that "conversion." Furthermore, his easy-going nihilism of pre-conversion days was not really affected by his insight. Looking back at his relation to Marie, or to Raymond, he did not ascribe to either any moral significance, nor did he regret anything he had done, including the death of the Arab. His attitude to moral aspects of his life remained unchanged, and being-towards-death did not alert him to the need of appraising the significance of what he was doing in life. In that regard, he totally lacked the capacity for self-judgment, so prominently manifested in Kurtz. Meursault's basic stance remained completely amoral; he looked at his life from a purely esthetic point of view. Even the happiness he experienced was

esthetic, in a metaphysical sort of way. In that sense he remained, and died, a stranger.

When Camus later, in a postscript to the novel, referred to its hero as "the only Christ we deserve," he emphasized Meursault's honesty, his refusal to play the hypocritical game of his society, his desire to live in the truth. But Camus goes too far, it seems to me, when he says of his hero that "Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and the truth." Conrad's Marlow also has a passion for truth and believes that lying has a taint of death in it. But he cannot bring himself to tell the truth about Kurtz's final words to his intended, because he thinks that such a disclosure would be "too dark." From what Camus tells us about his hero we can conclude that Meursault's passion for truth would have made him indifferent to Marlow's scruples. One cannot help feeling uneasy about such an absolutising of one value: it appears to be oblivious to all other values. Camus is right when he goes on to describe his hero's passion as negative, but he is mistaken when he concludes that such a negative passion alone "is a condition of a conquest of ourselves or of the world." No matter how important and admirable such a negative passion may be, it nevertheless leaves Meursault without any appreciation of qualities that give life positive meaning. "This is my way. What is yours?", asks Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Up to the dramatic confrontation with the priest, Meursault had no way he could call his. The one he articulates after the confrontation shows much metaphysical pathos but no moral direction.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, Meursault transforms his encounter with death into an occasion to rescue his life from the grip of apathy. As he says, he opens his heart to the benign indifference of the universe. The important fact, however, is not that the universe remains indifferent, but that *Meursault* is no longer so, because his heart *has* responded. Were he to receive a last minute reprieve from the guillotine, his attitude to life would have been radically different from what it was before, unless, of course, his conversion should turn out to be just a self-deceived pathos of the moment and not a real insight, as Camus seems to present it. But even when we take into account certain misgivings and reservations about Meursault, all four of our fictional characters definitely bear out Spinoza's view. To the extent that human beings live up to their freedom, they use it to grow in wisdom -- to heighten their self-understanding, to advance the cause in which they believe, or to salvage what is salvageable. Because they face death in that spirit, all four qualify as Servants of Life.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Faust*, B.Q. Morgan, trans., (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1954), p. 129.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), p. 112.
- <sup>3</sup> Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 392.
- <sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1969), p. 154.
- <sup>5</sup> According to William Barrett, Heidegger's "analysis of death is perhaps the most important and satisfying interpretation in his whole picture of man." *What is Existentialism?* (New York, 1962), p. 62.
- <sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 289.
- <sup>7</sup> *Being and Time*, p. 308.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Edwards, *Heidegger on Death*, Monist Monograph No. 1, LaSalle, Ill., 1979.
- <sup>9</sup> For further discussion of this question, see my *Philosophy in Literature: Metaphysical Darkness and Ethical Light* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1982).